

## Dialogue

---

### *The Vibrant Shimmer*

BARRY BARCLAY

## *The Vibrant Shimmer*

Barry Barclay

THE FOLLOWING KEYNOTE ADDRESS *was delivered at the twenty-second annual Pacific Islands Studies Conference, Featuring Paradise: Representations of Pacific Islanders in Film and Video, on 11 November 1997 in Honolulu. This version is reproduced here with minor changes and a selection from the illustrations used by the author in his presentation.*

I want to begin with a French merchant banker who, just over one hundred years ago, had a Danish wife and a solid family set-up. This was, at least, until he took to image-making. The banker's name was Paul Gauguin. There not being in banking circles, it seems, much that excited him in the way of potential subject matter, Gauguin painted mostly "the exotic." He imaged not just other people, but other people's people.

I want to begin, not, as you might expect, in Tahiti, where the banker imaged another people's people in most memorable ways, but on the austere coast of western France at the tiny Breton port of Pont Aven. Gauguin had four extended stays in Pont Aven, painting without a break (figure 1). In the winter of 1888, he produced the canvas, *The Vision after the Sermon*; the detail shows Jacob wrestling with the angel (figure 2).

"I believe I have attained in these figures a great rustic and superstitious simplicity," he wrote to Vincent van Gogh. "It is all very severe."

It has been claimed that this painting is the first complete result of what came to be called synthetism—the flat surface; curving, rhythmic contours; forms hugely simplified; the exultation of color; line taking precedent over modeling. ("No more modeling," proclaims Maurice Denis; he is only twenty years old at this time.) The word gets out from Pont Aven to Paris, Denis comes out with his famous definition—"A painting is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain way"—and a fuse has been lit.

During his first visit to Pont Aven, Gauguin wrote to the Danish



FIGURE 1. Paul Gauguin. *Gauguin at His Easel*. 1885.



FIGURE 2. Paul Gauguin. *The Vision after the Sermon*. 1888.

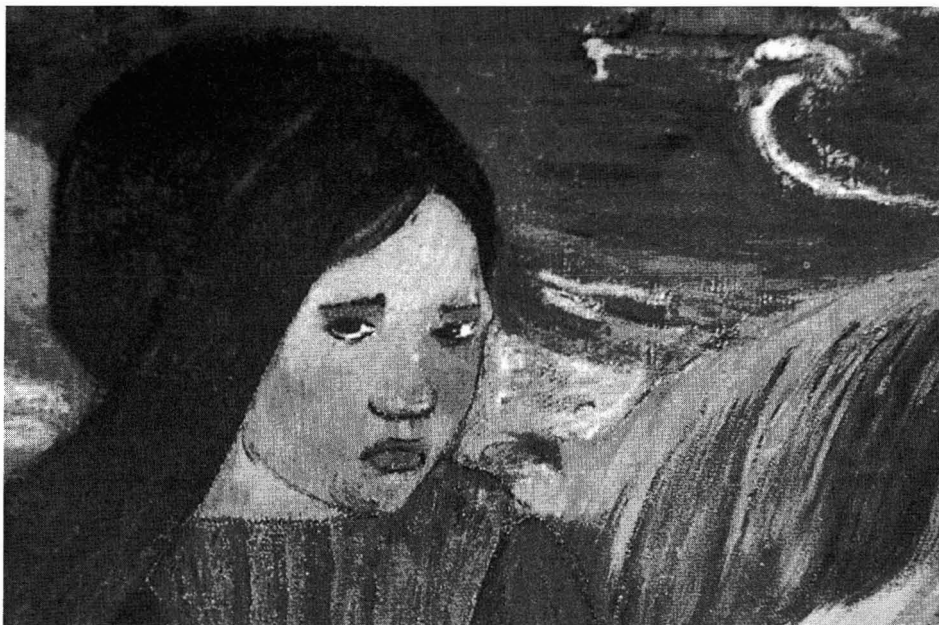


FIGURE 3. Paul Gauguin. Detail from *Breton Girls by the Sea*. 1889.

wife he had left in order to paint, "You may think that I am lonely. Far from it. There are painters here winter and summer alike . . . all foreigners . . . two Danish women, Hagsborg's brother and plenty of Americans." In fact, several generations of poets, novelists, and painters had used Pont Aven as a base and source of inspiration: the Romantics first, then the academics from the Paris studios, the Impressionists (a decade of them), the Symbolists. The railway line arrived in 1863, bringing sea bathers into the area—ocean swimming had become a fad (figure 3). In the summers of the 1870s, you might have found as many as a hundred painters in Pont Aven. Accommodation was basic and cheap, artists arranged credit at the cafes, many bartered completed canvases for board.

"Pont Aven has one advantage over other places in Brittany," wrote Englishman Henry Blackburn in his guide: *Breton Folk: An Artistic Tour in Brittany*. "Its inhabitants in their picturesque costumes have learned that to sit as a model is a pleasant and lucrative profession, and they do this for a small fee without hesitation. . . . It is only at harvest time, when field labourers are scarce, that the demand may be greater than the supply, and recruits have to be found in neighbouring villages" (figure 4).





FIGURE 4. Paul Gauguin. Detail from *Green Christ of Breton Calvary*. 1889.

And second, I want to turn to two poems, both from an English poet of the early 1900s, A E Housman.

In the morning, in the morning,  
In the happy field of hay,  
Oh they looked at one another  
By the light of day.

In the blue and silver morning  
On the haycock as they lay,  
Oh they looked at one another  
And they looked away.

As a director and writer of documentary films—and documentary is my first passion—I do not recall ever thinking of documentary as reportage or straightforward documentation. At its best, it has to do, I believe, with what New Zealand poet Allen Curnow likes to call “the invisibles.”

On the haycock, two lovers lie; we can document that with the cam-

era. But in setting up and isolating that moment of their looking at one another *and then looking away*, we are playing lord and master with invisibles that have somehow to do with the general condition of our humanity as *we* perceive it. It may or may not have something to do with the real-life lovers in the happy field of hay, the *visibles* as it were, what is actually in front of our lens; it has everything to do though with our personal preoccupations, the invisibles that fire us up or snap at our heels from time to time.

The choice of every transcript we decide to haul out for our first assembly, the decision to extend the final shot of a sequence by twelve frames rather than four, has to do with *invisibles*.

Gauguin was not in Pont Aven to document life there; authenticity was not the name of his game. And it would not have been the name of my game either—not the name of my *real* game—had I taken a documentary camera to Pont Aven one hundred years ago.

My second Housman poem goes this way:

When I came last to Ludlow  
Amidst the moonlight pale,  
Two friends kept step beside me,  
Two honest lads and hale.

Now Dick lies long in the churchyard  
And Ned lies long in jail,  
And I come home to Ludlow  
Amidst the moonlight pale.

I read that poem to a group of Maori friends. One of them (a writer) asked straight off, “Did he do it?” (Thus spoke the plot constructor.)

Whether or not anything was done by the man walking by moonlight back into Ludlow, there is obviously potential for ninety minutes of big-screen drama here, during which we find out what happened to Dick and Ned, ninety minutes full of crafted plot turns. But at the end of the drama, the audience is going to be brought back to the haunting image of a man returning on his own at night to his home town, all innocence behind him.

Invisibles. Invisibles on the road to Ludlow, invisibles “in the blue and silver morning,” invisibles in and around Pont Aven. Personal invisibles, intensely felt—and why not?

On the other hand, I do not believe we should flatter ourselves that our



FIGURE 5. Paul Gauguin. Detail from *Self-Portrait with Palette*. 1893.

artistic tours through other people's landscapes have much to do with the locals and how they see and what they feel about the imponderables. The landscape created by Housman was, on his own admission, largely one of his imagination; the whole time he was in Pont Aven, Gauguin never ventured out farther than three hundred yards from where he was housed to paint (figure 5).

To put it another way and bring it all a little closer to home: there was a Maori function in Auckland earlier in the year and a significant number of elders were in attendance. Also, there was a woman in her early twenties, a television documentary researcher. She was a New Zealander of European descent, a Pakeha as the word is at home.

This young Pakeha had been hired by a local production house to research the Maori concept of the sacred, the concept of "tapu" as it is broadly called. The production house had successfully applied for public funding for a prime-time television documentary on the topic, it was to be a commercial hour in length, and here the woman was at the function setting out on her research. Throughout the afternoon, she was seen moving from elder to elder asking for insights.

I wince to hear of young colleagues carrying on in that way. It is a bit

like a six-year-old child at a grown-ups' party trying to find out from the uncles and aunties how babies are made. The real naivety though (and this is what incensed those Maori who spoke up on the incident) lies with the funding body that bankrolled the program in the first place.

In the thirty and more years I've enjoyed local television, I have not once seen a state-funded prime-time television documentary—I have not seen any documentary, in fact—on some of the notions of the sacred and profane as they have been shaped and reshaped on the Pakeha spiritual landscape, notions such as that of infants being born with the stain of sin, for example, of there being perpetual fires in the afterworld, of bread being made flesh. Our Pakeha program makers would very likely balk at the challenge of exploring those concepts, just as Maori would probably balk at making a program on *tapu*. Not that Maori would be likely to get public funding to make a program on that topic, not, at least, if the past thirty years of state-funded television are anything to go by; whereas the record shows that Pakeha have been given many opportunities to work out their invisibles on the landscape of the Maori world.

The fourth time Gauguin left Pont Aven (November 1894; he was never to return) he was on a walking stick. Bleak though his departure from that granite town came to be, the man limping and on morphine for the pain, Gauguin had brought elementals together there on his surfaces in a way that had not been evident before in the western imagination, not, at least, with purpose, and over a number of finished works. "A painting is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain way." It was a breakthrough that has come to work its way into every nook and cranny.

And what was the breakthrough has become the yardstick; it has become the standard by which things are measured by those who know; it has also become the guideline by which things must be measured by those who have been empowered by others to know, who are in the business of guidelines and knowing.

I wish to propose something: What say the women of the Gauguin canvases were to take it upon themselves to speak? (figure 6). This woman: what might she say about the couple of chaps (one wearing theatrical wings hired from a fancy-dress place) belting each other to bits on the red green? (figure 7). I have asked friends about this. One suggestion is: "Oh, those two do that *every benefit day*." That from a single parent on a domestic purposes benefit. Another suggestion is: "The guy with the wings has it in for the other guy because the other guy is from Paris and



FIGURE 6. Paul Gauguin. Detail of the heads of village women from *The Vision after the Sermon*. 1888.



FIGURE 7. Paul Gauguin. Detail from *The Vision after the Sermon*. 1888.

every time he comes to Pont Aven *he insists on speaking French!*" (Brittany has an endangered indigenous language of its own, of course.)

As a glimpse of what "the women might be saying in the painting," I want to run a five-minute clip from my first feature film, *Ngati*. It was completed some ten years ago and came to this festival in competition. *Ngati* is a slang word for a particular tribe on the East Coast of the North Island of New Zealand called Ngati Porou. The film was set in the late 1940s within Ngati Porou in the tiny fictional village of Kapua, and the clip is from the finale of the story. Central to the economy of Kapua is the abattoir, or freezing works, as we call it. The city-based company that owns the works is about to close it down. Can it and the town be saved?

The video clip shows a public meeting underway in a hall at Waipiro Bay, or "Kapua." Officials sit on a dais, local Maori present various views. Sally speaks strongly. "We can save our works." She is backed up by her father, who says: "*It will work if we in Kapua do what we have always done—pull together.*" The company official winds up: "*It is only a matter of detail to make it work.*"

In real life though, the small rural communities of Ngati Porou and elsewhere were *not* able to make it work. During the fifties and sixties, painful migrations to city centers and other parts of the country took place, one family following another, and the rural tribal homelands came to be left to the old people and to the ancestors.

This is Maori playwright Hone Kouka (figure 8). I had him pose for this shot just off Cuba St; he is twenty-nine, he has won a string of awards. Hone is of Ngati Porou descent; he is a "Ngati." Back in the 1960s, his own family moved to the south of the South Island, which is about as far removed as you can get from your ancestral homelands if you happen to be a Ngati. In 1996, Hone's most recent play debuted at the International Festival of the Arts in Wellington. It is called *Waioira* and tells the story of a fictional 1950s Ngati Porou family from a fictional Ngati Porou town called Waioira setting themselves up in the city of Christchurch in the South Island. The father has good employment in a timber yard; his wife, Wai, puts family before all else; Amiria is nineteen and into everything the city has to offer; the second daughter Rongo is eighteen; and there is Boyboy. He is fifteen and a lover of the outdoors.

Each of Hone's Ngati characters has to adjust to a very different kind of world from that of the Ngati homelands—a world that is materialistic, racist, unfeeling, often enough. But adjust they do, each in their own





FIGURE 8. Playwright Hone Kouka.

way. Each of them—except Rongo. Standing alone on a beach near the start of the play, she addresses her long-dead Nanny:

“Nanny, I am so hungry, not for food, but for words. Here we speak Pakeha, not Maori. Not allowed to. I’m scared, Nanny. Scared I’ll waste away to a whisper and then nothing, and I will forget the words, and if I do, my children will have nothing to eat.”

The ancestors—the *tipuna*—appear beside her as a chorus from the other world. They challenge her right through the play. At one point, they heave out a chant of defiance, or *haka*: the translation runs:

Listen carefully as my beckoning call is all alluring  
Like stars in the night

All my power, and awe, and energy  
Draw you closer—you are powerless to stop it . . .

Rongo’s cry is:

How lonely my heart aches for those days of old,  
for the being I once was, now buried inside me.

As the play approaches its climax, each of the family members comes to terms with the hand that fate has dealt them. But not Rongo. Right at

the finale, she gives way to the call of the *tipuna*, walks out into the ocean, and begins to drown herself. Her sister Amiria discovers her and pulls her up onto the beach. By this time she is very far gone.

"You still here?" Amiria asks through her tears. "Oh you're so heavy. Your hair. Sand in your hair. Baby, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything."

There are calls for a doctor. "Why the hell don't you breathe?" her father cries. Then instead of getting her into the back seat of a car and driving her to the doctor, the father orders that she be put down on the sand. He is going to pray over her in Maori. He is going back to the old ways.

Amiria turns on him in fury and despair: "It's your fault, you're the one who brought her here! She didn't want to come here. She's gone, and all you do is throw empty words over her. That's all we ever do, empty words. She's gone, she's gone, and it's your fault."

But the father persists with his prayers, and the prayers turn into a *haka*. His son comes in beside him and dances with him. By now, the *tipuna* chorus is on the opposite side of Rongo:

All my power, and awe, and energy  
Drawing you closer—you are powerless to stop it . . .

It has become a contest between two worlds; it thunders across the stage. The stage notes read: "This cacophony continues until the *haka* finishes. Near the end of the *haka*, Rongo slowly stands and begins a *haka* of her own. She has heard her family. She has come back. The family have beaten the *tipuna*. Rongo sings a song to farewell them. Its beauty should pierce the air. The *tipuna* take over the song—and then they leave."

Rongo is left standing with her family.

For me, this final statement of the play is both haunting and brave. At the end of the day, it is a repeat of what was said at the climax of *Ngati*—"It will work if we in Kapua do what we have always done—pull together." This time, though, it is said in a new context: the freezing works have closed; the families are in the city.

On another level, the play is saying, I think: "Shove off, ancestors; don't come round here just to pull us back to the old way, back to a life that has gone." It is a daring affirmation. It has not been put so emphatically in any Maori work I know of. It is saying "Shove off, ancestors" in a special way, of course. It is not denying the ancestors their reality. Nevertheless, it is asserting a defiant stake in the new world. Rongo will survive. She is with family, after all.



This first production of the play and subsequent productions too were warmly received by audiences. The play is invited to Canada and Germany. It has been a very successful play. I want to tell you though about the response of two of our theatre critics to the premiere production. Both are writing for major outlets; both are Pakeha. This from Denis Welch writing in the *New Zealand Listener*: “Kouka’s main purpose is to depict the unthinking Pakeha racism of those days and show how Maori have reaped the whirlwind today by colluding in their own humiliation.” (I do not think Kouka’s *main* purpose was anything like that.) Welch adds: “The character of Rongo, a lame girl who talks to her *tipuna*, is overloaded with symbolism: and the frequent interpolations of a Maori chorus, though stirring, tend to smother the action.”

Writing for the *Dominion*, Timothy O’Brien says, “*Waiora* doesn’t quite seem to hang together. There is the problem of point of view. The nearly tragic finale plays weakly because the central character of Rongo is not well established; she suffers in comparison with the youngest brother, Boyboy, whose problems seem to provide the real climax of the play and steal the thunder of what is to come.”

I believe these two critics were watching the surface action: the tribulations of Boyboy, for example, and the “unthinking Pakeha racism of those days.” The interpolations of the ancestors smother this type of action, the central character of Rongo is not well established in the “whirlwind of today,” she suffers in comparison to the “real” characters—the mother and the father, her sister Amiria, Boyboy. She is “a lame girl who talks to her *tipuna*” (their words, not mine). These are the words, in my view, of people looking in on a culture from the outside. The resolution of the wider drama holds no real interest for them, it does not relate in any way to their worldscape, perhaps it is antagonistic to it.

But I might be wrong in this. Denis and Timothy might have a better handle on it than I give them credit for. And anyway, I am raising this episode to illustrate another point, one having to do with imaging our own people on film in drama after one hundred years of cinema in our country. The point I wish to make is that at home [in New Zealand] it is the Denises and Timothys who will be assessing your feature film script. They will almost certainly all be Pakeha. They will be steeped in the invisibles of the outside culture. They will not believe in the *tipuna*. Above all, they will know how drama is to be made.

To put it in a nutshell: if *Waiora* were presented to mainstream film script editors and assessors at home, it would be returned for further work. It would be said that the character of Rongo needed greater atten-

tion. "We cannot grasp the nature of her tragedy; she is underdeveloped; your screenplay shows great promise though. Please submit a further draft." And there will be a further draft, and a further draft, there will never be a film in the shape of the original. What was the breakthrough has become the yardstick; it has become the standard by which things are measured by those who know; it has also become the guideline by which things must be measured by those who have been empowered by others to know, who are in the business of guidelines and knowing.

I wish to mention some names among many. There is the name of Te Kooti Rikirangi; there is the name of Te Whiti o Rongomai; there is the name of Titokowaru; there is the name of Te Rauparaha. Prophets, warriors, pacifists, guerrilla fighters, men and women of much spiritual depth: we've had our share of them. Mighty figures from the past, mighty stories. I have heard Maori say often enough: "We possess great stories; Pakeha have nothing to match them"; or "We must tell our stories or the Pakeha will be in there telling them for us"; or "Sooner or later Pakeha will have to turn to us because we are the only ones with the really big New Zealand stories."

But the great figures whose names spring so readily to the lips of Maori have one thing in common: they were defeated. Defeated in open battle, or in prison, or in pardon, or by the words of the new religions, or in the material goods of the invader culture. Tamed men, savages no more: at least, that is how it is in most of the written histories.

On the other hand, for many, many Maori, these heroes from the past live on, they were never truly broken, they still sing to their people. For such Maori (and, in my view, they are made up of more or less the whole of Maoridom) the cinema camera as we know it after one hundred years is a snake in the reeds, venomous. We play with it at our peril.

"But it's just a matter of getting the story right, of telling our side of the story," most of my Maori colleagues will protest.

"You will be forced to write a 'Geronimo' script," is my reply, "because if you don't, you won't get the investment; or if you do get the investment, and set your jaw against the Geronimo formula, you won't get it distributed." Meantime, the producers say, the investors say, the script editors say, the commentators say: "But a good script is a good script. Stories are universal."

I understand Hollywood has made as many as thirty feature films on the Cheroke Apache warrior Goyatla, or Geronimo, as the Mexicans dubbed him. In those thirty features, defeat is the common strand. It is a

particular type of defeat. On the one hand, you have the invader, uniformed and on a payroll, flawed perhaps, reluctant in his brutality, but fundamentally in possession of the right, and more than up to the distasteful task history has allocated him; and on the other hand, the pursued native, one with formidable talents perhaps, yet a man out of step with the times, a man belonging to an earlier era.

Before leaving for this conference, I watched once again Wallis Hall's epic and compassionate telling of the Goiatla story. His film is titled simply *Geronimo*. The final lines given to Geronimo are: "For many years, the One-God made me a warrior. No gun, no bullets, could ever kill me, that was my power. Now my time is over. Now, maybe, the time of our people is over." As I have said, a particular kind of defeat.

If cinema is about anything, it is surely about heroes and heroines. So try to imagine what it must be like to be attempting to set up dramatic films for your own people in a climate that does not allow you to celebrate your own people's heroes and heroines.

To use the Geronimo formula (and no other formula acceptable to the majority culture has so far emerged) is to dispossess your own people of their spiritual and warrior guides by reducing those hero- and heroine-guardians to the losers the formula requires; and, at the same time, the formula ensures you give legitimacy to the descendants of the first invaders as the true possessors of the land; their forebears carried the flag; they set the foundations of the nation. Let us all rejoice in the future to come, amen.

In memory of Goiatla and the Cherokeewas who followed him, let us be reminded of the words: "*E hoa, ka whawhai tonu ahau ki a koe, ake, ake!*" (Friend, I shall fight against you, for ever and ever!)

I had hoped to bring a new feature-length film documentary to this festival. It was to have been about Maori involvement in filmmaking over the one hundred years of cinema in New Zealand. I had planned to call it *Karorirori* or *Vibrant Shimmer*. It could be the vibrant shimmer of summer; it could be the vibrant shimmer of images on the screen. The title has been taken from a traditional Maori blessing that translates, "May the vibrant shimmer of summer always dance across your hunting path."

Your festival's founding director, Jeannette Paulson, wrote to my producer with a copy sent by her to our only possible funder, the New Zealand Film Commission, that not only would the festival screen *Karorirori*, it would highlight it by having an evening screening in

Hawai'i's largest theatre, restored now, seating twelve hundred people. Mr Barclay would introduce the film, there would be a reception in Mr Barclay's honor.

For some weeks, I had a vision of being at this reception in Hawai'i and being asked for the supper waltz by an heiress from Texas who just happened to have a passion for Southern Hemisphere films. No such luck. We had been trying to get the documentary financed for almost two years. The film commission had ducked bringing it to the vote for eighteen months. Eventually, a special meeting was held, but we were turned down. So, no supper waltz, just me here talking.

However, some two years earlier, the film commission had funded us to do a research exercise on the *Karorirori* concept. I traveled with Ngati Raukawa actress and writer, Tungia Baker, to some strategic places in the North Island, interviewing people, taking stills. We mounted the material in a hundred-page picture-word script.

We have been ten days on the road together, Tungia has made me stop the car so she can pick up this dead turkey. Tonight she will scald the bird and pluck the main feathers to give away to a weaver of traditional Maori cloaks—good feathers are hard to come by.

Tom Fox lives near Waipiro Bay where *Ngati* was shot. He was an elder attached to the production (figure 9). He tells Tungia, "There was one old lady lived just along the road from us. They had a little dairy farm. She got on her horse and down she went. This was her first [moving] pictures. Afterwards she said what a marvellous machine it was. 'For a mere two shillings,' she told me, 'I can see the world.'"

Sharon's house was turned into one of the main locations for *Ngati* (figure 10). She tells Tungia: "When you swung the door, it jammed shut, and the film crew wanted it to swing free—so *they cut the door!!* The house was on a bit of a lean, so they needed to cut quite a bit out of it, enough to make it swing. Then they left it!" This is the door in question, seen from the inside (figure 11). Notice the gap along the top. Tungia asks, "How do you keep the rain out?" Sharon replies, "Just got some newspapers and stuffed it in there. All these years, just stuffing it!" (She says this, I have to say, with a huge belly-laugh.)

This is a distant glimpse of Waipiro Bay itself (figure 12). It's right in the heart of Ngati territory. On the right of the picture is the hall in which you saw the meeting being held in the *Ngati* video clip we ran earlier. This hall had once been Waipiro Bay's cinema (figure 13). It was later shifted to this spot. In fact, it was the very cinema hall in which the old lady with



FIGURE 9. Elder Tom Fox laughing with Tungia Baker.

the dairy farm had seen her first moving pictures. "For a mere two shillings, you can see the world!"

Immediately our research trip was behind us, we put our *Karorirori* script together and presented it to the film commission. One of the assessors had a television background and had plenty to say: "Who is the film for?" "What is being pursued here?" "The proposal is going it knows not where, nor even asks the question."

Strangely enough, I have some sympathy for what the assessor is saying. It is hard for me to be explicit about what the script intends. That is not because I am unable to put it into words as such, but rather because I cannot readily put it into words for the particular kinds of people who are sitting across the table from me. I have no sympathy though for what lies behind the following statement in the assessment: "What makes it a documentary about filmmaking that is essentially Maori? How are these experiences different from Pakeha? Will any of the interviews have a perspective on this?"

Can you see how deadly such questions are? There is a panel of men; a woman presents an idea; the men ask: "What makes your idea an idea



FIGURE 10. Sharon Harrison seated in her kitchen.



FIGURE 11. The gap in Sharon's door, left by the filmmakers.





FIGURE 12. The meetinghouse and dining room at Waipiro Bay.



FIGURE 13. Old cinema hall converted into marae dining room, Waipiro Bay.

that is *essentially female*?" She must explain to the men how her experiences are different from theirs. She is asked, "Will any of the interviews have a perspective on this?"

Should the women of Pont Aven step down out of the canvases of others and claim a life of their own, they will be subjected to training sessions and workshops; there will be acceptable standards; there will be expectations in markets they never created and like as not care little about. There will be panels. Some will be invited onto them. They will endorse what the majority decide.

Others will be moved to seek funding from the panels. They will be asked to explain what, if anything, is new and exciting in what they propose, for understood, but not said, is the fact that they have been painted before by people who knew how it was to be done. They will find out that it is already known what is authentic, what will sell well. There were big successes. How are they going to top those? They are only beginning, after all. Best to concentrate on small and manageable projects until they are told they are ready. And, in the meantime, there are always the workshops, always the training opportunities.

Unless certain blessings dance across their hunting paths—great blessings, often unexpected, fought for tooth and nail by others—the women of the canvases will give up on the struggle to paint their own icons in their own way and will remain images in the canvases of others.

Now, speaking from my small neck of the woods, the vibrant shimmer has fallen across our hunting paths, irregularly perhaps, by good luck rather than by good governance perhaps, but there have been achievements. It is easy enough to check off the big ones. The four feature films obviously stand out: *Ngati* first, *Mauri*, *Te Rua*, *Once Were Warriors*. These features were pretty well Maori creations from top to bottom. Easy enough to check off the big ones and miss some of the so-called small ones: the build-up of Maori technicians, progress in Maori film archiving.

Easy enough also to find ease of mind in reading the patterns on the surface of the waters as signs or signifiers of what might be going on below the surface. I am thinking of surface signifiers such as "Maori drama tends to focus on the people as a whole," and "Maori work seems to embrace the old people as a matter of course." Such observations are valid enough, and it is useful to have them put into words from time to time. It strikes me now though that something deeper might have been



going on over the past twenty-five years during which Maori have gained some access to the camera.

"Divergent gradients" is a phrase I have latched onto. It has come out of a rescreening on television of a six-part series of fifty-minute documentaries called *Tangata Whenua* that I directed twenty-five years ago. It is considered a landmark series, having put Maori on the screen for the first time as living, talking people.

Let me tell you of one type of Maori response to the *Tangata Whenua* rescreening, a type of response I have not had before to any screening of any film of mine—anywhere—ever.

I am lounged back in the sun on a bench in the central square of a provincial city called Hamilton. I go there every Thursday. I am passing the time. A big man approaches, a Maori. He has his hand out. I have never seen him in my life before. Without getting up, I shake his hand, he shakes mine, and he sits down beside me. We talk about the football results, about certain members of Parliament, about the tax cuts that will benefit only the well off. Then he turns and leans along the bench toward me and says, "You were on the tele!" Everywhere else I have been, people will come up and say right off, "You were on the tele," *then* hold out their hand. Not in the provinces, not from Maori there. Men such as I have described might sit half an hour. There is a certain pride in their eyes, pride in what they had seen on the screen, and they will talk about it.

I have made major films in the Pakeha world as well as the Maori one. I made a sixty-minute film documentary on Indira Gandhi, then prime minister of India, for example. It was in 1975, during the Emergency; no western film crews were being allowed into India at the time. I made a feature-length documentary on an unlikely but highly political topic: Who owns the seeds of the world? We filmed in eight countries, from Italy to Nicaragua.

So over my thirty years in filmmaking, I have had a foot in one world at times, in the other world at times. It has led me to the phrase I mentioned, "divergent gradients," which has to do with two worlds, with two gradients. Let us call them "Gradient A" for the universal gradient, and "Gradient X" for the Maori one.

The "divergent gradients" phenomenon happens this way: with a Pakeha film, the film's principal period of glory is at the *beginning* of its life, at its premieres, during its main run, perhaps during a second run.

After that, it seems to me, the gradient of vitality tracks downward. It is not that a great film's greatness simply evaporates, of course, but, in terms of its vitality as a living document within the community that produced it, it becomes a matter of gracious retirement, of a benign half-life in the reserve stocks of the national memory. That is what I call the Gradient A phenomenon.

But with Maori work (with Maori work, that is, within the Maori community) the gradient tracks *upward*. That is the feature of Gradient X. The early life of the image-document might be rather modest, but the document increases in vigor and relevance as each decade goes by.

I have seen this happen now with my own eyes, my own work in my own lifetime transformed from "something important" into what Maori call *taonga*. The simple translation of *taonga* is "treasure," but it is different from the kind of treasure I am familiar with from the Pakeha world: the family heirloom, the historic document, the archived transcript, the restored artwork. *Taonga* is a growing thing, increasing in vitality as the decades pass.

Perhaps some of the reason why a *taonga* grows in strength, as one generation holds it for a time and then passes it on to the next, has to do with that sense of *whakapapa* (genealogy) which is all-pervasive in the Maori world; that sense of identity through blood-lines, that respect for the past that is our future, for the living family that stretches back and stretches forward.

To pop back in time and place to the far north of New Zealand in the early 1820s: the Wesleyan missionaries arrive from England, they call their mission site *Wesleydale*. Their sermonizing prompts all sorts of questions. One young man asks, for example, "If only Eve had eaten the apple, would God have punished Adam as well?"

As for the existence of Hell: how could a God of such goodness be so cruel as to create such a place? Maori tell the missionaries that even if such a place does exist, they will not be going to it. "Why not?" the missionaries ask. "When our relations see us going into the flames, they will pull us clear," is the Maori reply.

The presence of the relations—the long dead, the near dead, those living close by, those living at a remove—is fundamental to Maori worldview. All are a living force. Now, here we are, mere technicians, filming those relations. In due course, the images we are responsible for recording will have the force of "witness," of "testament," of the "saints-made-alive," to use expressions from the Christian tradition.

Imagine that right now there are housed somewhere film images of the appearances of Our Lady at Lourdes; of Lord Buddha moving along a path; of Jesus being jostled by a crowd, or preaching. What effect would a viewing of such footage have on our perceptions of the Godhead, of right conduct, of mortality and immortality, of grace? Where would the screenings take place? What kind of priesthood would be in supervision?

I am not so daft as to claim that images I have made have anything like that level of force for any Maori at the moment or ever will have in the future. Yet we are in the same realm, I suspect, certainly as far as the families immediately connected to the person being shown are concerned.

I was in the Hamilton Library, in the reference section on the second floor. A Maori man in his mid-thirties—he had a suit on and was carrying a number of books—squatted by the table I was at, his eyes blinking a little as he spoke. He said, “Those films of yours that have just been on TV force us to think about what *whakapapa* means to us now. We’ve got to redefine *whakapapa*,” he said. His words haunt me. I think he might be right; film is pushing us to that.

I feel like one muttering on the fringes of reason here. I am not equipped to make sense of it. I have no mandate to be a spokesman. But one right I do have, and I am insisting on exercising it: it is the right to say with some authority that “something funny is going on here.” Film as *whakapapa*, film as future, film as divergent gradients: there may be major implications for those of us working in the film field.

There are implications for archiving, for instance. At stake is: Who will be the guardians of this kind of material, material that gains in witness in this way? What authority will they have? Could that authority be exercised in perpetuity? Precisely *over what* is the authority to be? (We have had a breakthrough on this at home [contact New Zealand Film Archive, Wellington] in the form of a deposit agreement that allows copyright to stand while giving traditional spiritual guardianship over the image to the relevant *hapu* or family in perpetuity.)

There are implications for distribution too. We have failed to get distribution on to the mainstream agenda at home. We have not even debated it among ourselves yet in any depth. Images are *taonga* given by our people. If we cannot take those *taonga* back to them, we are cheats of the most common kind—and we are doing nothing about it.

There are implications for the scripting process. How am I to script *Karorirori*, my documentary on Maori filmmaking, for example? If I make it for the world of Gradient A—for the foreign and local festivals,

the "Two weeks Auckland—Two weeks Wellington" cinema release, the television sale (for the bright First-Life, in other words, followed by the down gradient into perpetual half-life)—I will focus on the material in a certain way. I will look for snappy examples. I will seek out clear and fetching lines of argument, in-your-face debate. How about "film-as-warrior," or "film-as-*whakapapa*"? I am following foreign invisibles here. I know how to do it. I will probably get the funding and I will win awards.

But how am I to script for the world of Gradient X, for the gradient that gathers strength decade by decade? What invisibles do I follow for that? Smart western debate is not going to help, with its glossy presentation, modern whistles and bells. In the world of Gradient X, I am in the world of past and future. I am in a culture that simply does not have it within itself to ever say, as Goiatla was made to say in the Geronimo film: "No gun, no bullets could ever kill me, that was my power. Now my time is over. Now, maybe, the time of our people is over."

"A painting is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain way," wrote Maurice Denis. Or did he? That is the way you will find him quoted in most books, but actually you will be reading only part of what he said. "Remember that before it is a warhorse, a naked woman, or a commonplace anecdote, a painting is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain way." That is how the full sentence runs. When working with the camera within the Maori community, as a Maori and with other Maori, I do not think it is usual or natural to leave off the first half of that sentence. *Remember that before it is a Maori (ie, your known world)*, a painting is essentially . . . etc. To cut off that first phrase is not the way most Maori think. What is more, I do not believe Maurice Denis would have asked it of us, symbolist and mystic that he was.

I am saying, I suppose, that our own *whakapapa* affects our conduct as artist-humans. I could no more leave off the first half of the Denis definition than fly, and I do not know of any Maori filmmakers who could either, not when they are working among Maori. This might give us cause to wonder how we fit into the general scheme of things. For myself, I turn for inspiration to the master carvers of old, what little I know of them. They carved at the behest of the community. Their completed carvings stood in the community as fierce protectors, as guides, as sheltering branches. They stood as long as the local people wished them to stand, and they grew in force as time went by.

I wish to leave it at that. It has been a privilege to contribute to your

conference. For the few days you have here together, let me repeat the blessing: "May the vibrant shimmer of summer lay across your hunting paths."

### *Abstract*

Interweaving strands from Gauguin's paintings created in Brittany (before he went to Tahiti), A E Housman's poems, Maori playwright Hone Kouka, Maori ancestors, and several decades of filmmaking experience, this paper looks at the making and unmaking of Maori documentary films. Tensions and misunderstanding between Maori filmmakers and Pakeha critics and funding agencies are examined. It is suggested that Maori projects and approaches are frequently undervalued because of different "gradients" in aesthetic sensibility and world-view.

KEYWORDS: documentary films, film critics, Gauguin, image-making, Maori filmmaking, New Zealand, television documentaries